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FIRE DEPARTMENT

A patient man at the helm

After a wait, Harriman gets chief job in Duxbury

By John Chaffee
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DUXBURY — Bill Harriman is living proof that persistence pays off.

Three years ago, Harriman just missed being named fire chief to succeed Carl O'Neil, who had retired.

Instead, the job went to an outsider, Kenneth Erickson, deputy chief in North Attleboro.

Although disappointed, Harriman stayed on as Duxbury's deputy chief.

"My commitment is to the Duxbury Fire Department," he said.

As it turned out, he and Erickson developed such a smooth working relationship that when Erickson resigned earlier this year to become fire chief in Walpole, veteran Duxbury Firefighter James Page said: "Their partnership has grown to such an extent that Kenny might like to take Bill with him if he could."

Before leaving, Erickson recommended that Harriman be named his successor.

"He's obviously the best man for the job," Erickson said. He also said Harriman's "whole heart is in the fire department."

Harriman grew up into his chosen profession.

"My dad and uncle were call firefighters when I was a boy in Carver," he said.

"A fire truck used to be housed in my uncle's barn across the street, so I used to be over there crawling on it all the time.

"There was an excitement about it," he said of firefighting.

Harriman began his career as a volunteer firefighter in his native Carver, where brother Dana is now fire chief.

"I never seriously considered an alternative," he said.

He joined the Duxbury Fire Department as a firefighter-EMT in 1971, after three years as a fire protection specialist in the Army and two years as a forest firefighter with the state Department of Natural Resources. He moved to Duxbury as a condition of his employment.

He was promoted to lieutenant in 1974 and to deputy chief in 1983.

After Erickson's departure five months ago, Harriman served as acting chief for the second time in three years.

There were 31 candidates for the permanent position. A 10-member selection committee appointed by Town Manager Rocco Longo recommended four finalists, one of whom was Harriman.

The four were subjected to a grueling two-day assessment that included role-playing, decision-making and responding to simulated firefighting problems.

Harriman takes command in Duxbury

■ CHIEF

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As Longo reported to the selectmen when he named him chief, Harriman was rated the best of the finalists.

Harriman has assumed command of a department with 20 full-time firefighters and eight call firefighters. The department's equipment includes three pumpers, a ladder truck, two ambulances, two forest fire trucks, a dive truck, a technical rescue truck and two boats.

The department's annual budget is \$1.1 million.

All personnel are based at and all equipment is housed at the central fire station on Route 3A, on the east side of a 24-square-mile town.

But Harriman wants to move some personnel and equipment west.

In keeping with a recommendation made by an ad hoc public safety study committee earlier this year, Harriman wants to reopen the Ashdod fire station in West Duxbury. The building was closed as a fire department substation five years ago to save money during an economic downturn.

"Our current staffing is great for this end of town, but we need to address the Ashdod issue," Harriman said.

The study committee found that it now takes fire trucks and ambulances more than four minutes to respond to emergencies in areas of Duxbury west of Route 3.



William J. Harriman

Age: 53

Occupation: Fire chief

Education: Associate's degree in fire science, Massasoit Community College; completed course work for bachelor's degree in fire science administration, Salem State College.

Family: Wife, Lucy; two stepchildren.

The committee said safety experts and the insurance industry agree that responding within four minutes is the key to saving lives and buildings in a residential town like Duxbury.

"To do it right, (reopening the Ashdod station) will require seven additional firefighters," Harriman said.

That could cost taxpayers more than \$200,000 annually, plus an estimated \$250,000 to renovate the Ashdod facility.

Reopening the station would "not only help people in West Duxbury but enhance fire protection at this end of town," Harriman said.

That is because with Ashdod personnel responding to calls in West Duxbury, central station firefighters would remain available for emergencies in the more populous east side of town.

Harriman said he expects to work with Longo to draft an Ashdod reopening proposal for consideration at the annual town meeting in March.

He said he anticipates no other major changes.

"There's nothing looming on the horizon that's going to change the dynamics of the fire department," he said.

The department responds to about 1,400 calls a year — 70 percent of them medical emergencies, the other 30 percent fire- or rescue-related.

Some communities contract for emergency medical service, but in Duxbury the service is provided by the fire department. All firefighters must be trained as emergency medical technicians.

"There's a good service being provided," Harriman said, and he intends to keep it that way.